



# Beyond the Stigma

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# The project

We know through our work in communities that the term '*mental health*' doesn't translate in many languages. The truth is, for some people in the South Asian community, there is no such thing as mental health. It's not talked about or recognised.

Beyond the Stigma brings together South Asian communities to challenge the stigma that surrounds mental health within their communities and encourage others to engage in the conversation.

This project explored how the arts can be a powerful way to share stories, experiences and challenge myths. It encouraged self-expression and celebrated identity and value, giving women the opportunity to explore ideas and develop their own writing and creative work.

This collection was developed during the course of the coronavirus pandemic, a time in which mental health became a hot topic of conversation. Though conversations about mental health are more common place in the UK today, we know through our work, there is still widespread stigma within South Asian communities.

Each story is an individual journey written in the women's own words, including experiences of self-harm, suicide, depression eating disorders and substance misuse. The way these women experience mental health difficulties is no different to the rest of society. However, their encounter is often set against a background of racism and cultural expectations which include pressures from family relating to gender biased customs.



# The stories



*"Intergenerational Trauma – search it, read about it, become aware of it. It doesn't just exist in our communities, but it prospers in our communities because those norms and those values passed down to us, seemingly to keep our culture and traditions alive, have taught us to suffer in silence."*

Beyond the Stigma



## The Mirror

There is a girl staring at me  
Five foot five, brown eyes  
With a soul so deep

There is a girl staring at me  
A smile so bright  
With tears that bleed

There is a girl staring at me  
In the prime of her life  
But wants to be set free

There was a girl staring at me

- Laddi

*"Through my journey, I found one thing. Counselling and CBT are not culturally sensitive. My counsellor said to me 'talk about this with your family', and I remember saying 'you don't understand Punjabi families if this is your advice'. I think a lot needs to be done when it comes to therapy."*

Beyond the Stigma



Dear younger self,  
How I wish I could be the shoulder you needed to cry on,  
the mother you needed to rely on,  
the guidance you needed to move you on...  
to brighter days.

Dear younger self,  
I know that life has made you feel beaten,  
I understand that you feel defeated,  
your energy and sweet spirit depleted,  
it's such a shame.

Dear younger self,  
it's not fair the struggles that life has dealt you,  
I know too often you felt too  
drained to find someone to help you,  
to see the light.

Dear younger self,  
I know life thought it could break you,  
but your strength is amazing,  
it made you  
the woman I am, so I thank you,  
for not giving up the fight.

- Nadia

*"The truth is, for some people in the South Asian community, there is no such thing as mental health. Mental health isn't talked about, it isn't recognised. Just the acknowledgment of it can be difficult. It's a taboo subject mainly."*

Beyond the Stigma



I grew up Sikh, in an Indian  
Culture,  
When I felt down people  
thought let's not approach her.

They thought there was  
something wrong with my  
head,  
but told me to get up and get out  
of bed.

'What is mental illness?' they  
once asked me,  
So I took them on a journey  
and got them to see.

Today it's more accepted,  
but more has to be done  
So let's all join together  
and become as one

- Prab

*"Talking about mental health is the hardest part. I am now brave enough to come forward and talk about my journey. In the Asian community mental health is not ordinarily discussed, it remains behind closed doors and it is a taboo subject. It's difficult because you can't see mental health and so it is kept hidden."*

Beyond the Stigma



Fear, shame, anger, trauma,  
from an early age I've had  
nothing but drama.

Crying, laughing, screaming, self-harming,  
these behaviours should have served as a warning.

That I was in pain.  
That I was in need.  
That I was so hurt.  
That I needed to grieve.  
That I was fed up.  
That life wasn't fair.  
That I was a child.  
I needed someone to be there.

Stronger, tougher, wiser, older,  
my experiences they made me a soldier.

- Nadia

*"People remain unwilling to acknowledge and talk about [mental health]. Why? Because culturally that is how we have been brought up, to get over our problems. We don't talk to others because if other people think there are problems within our family then it brings shame to our family, our culture and our religions."*

Beyond the Stigma





# The stigma



# Lok Ki Kehnge?

*“It is my mission to have this phrase ingrained in your memory for the right reasons. For too long, has it sat comfortable on the tongues of our families. It reinforces a tradition of silence and female conditioning. It regulates our life choices to keep us in the tight-fitting mould of the “brown female”. Mental health doesn’t fit in that mould - just let that sink in!”*

*“We weren’t discussing it at the dinner table and it wasn’t taught at school. I was quite oblivious to it, it felt like something out of fictional tales. Growing up, if you were sad, you had to make sure no one realised you were sad.”*

*“There is still the stigma that ‘depression’ means that someone will kill themselves or that they are ‘crazy’. People don’t see the daily impact of depression, or the fact that their loved one needs support. They do not need people to treat them differently, as though they are possessed.”*

*“If you do open up about mental health, people can think less of you. You are not valued in the same way as others.”*





Bringing shame to our family, culture and religion - a reflection on parenting

Most people in our communities don't want to talk about it, understand it or want to really learn, and so it goes on...

Intergenerational racism and trauma

GOD, Rab, Allah, Baba Ji, Bhagavan, Sri.....

The family doctor!





# The racism





# The scrutiny

- The sharing of stories to tackle the stigma - the sooner we can acknowledge it, the easier it will be for us to get the right support. The more that people think like this, the less people will grow up to hold the negative stigma that is currently attached to mental health.
- Culturally informed/sensitive services and supports.
- Co-production working with South Asian communities to break down barriers and foster a better awareness.
- Work alongside influencers within the community to normalise mental health, such as religious establishments promoting awareness and access to services.
- LANGUAGE
- Commissioning services and supports that are proactively anti-racist and can demonstrate this practice.



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